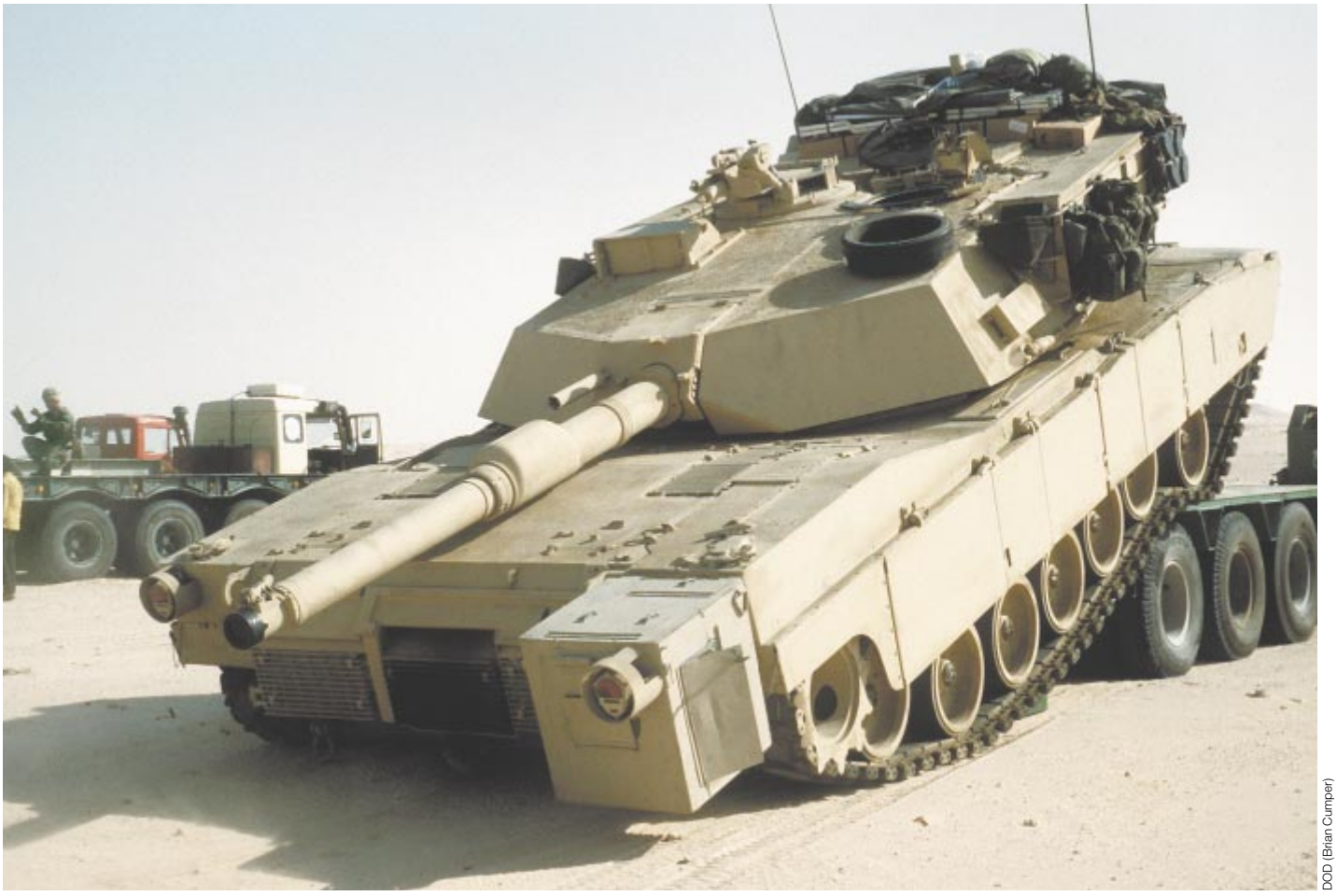
Lessons of Desert Storm

By BARRY R. McCAFFREY



DOD (Brian Cumper)

M1–A1 tank rolling off Saudi transport, Desert Shield.

Our memories of the Persian Gulf War include CNN images of antiaircraft tracers lighting the sky over Baghdad and smart bombs striking bridges and buildings. Americans recall the event as a stunning victory over a well-armed, brutal, but ultimately inept enemy achieved in a thousand hours. They believe that the war was just—wrapped in the legitimacy of the United Nations—and checked a ruthless dictator and restored independence to Kuwait. The ambiguities of the Vietnam War were largely absent during Desert Storm. The conflict in the Persian Gulf was decisive and supported by the international community. Yet for the Army and Marine Corps it also distorted expectations on the cost of ground combat as well as the nature of modern warfare.

Victory was not secured after only a few days of fighting on land; it was

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fifteen years in the making. It was rooted in the lessons of Vietnam:

- war should not be entered into without full public support
- to gain that support, troops should be put into combat only when national interests are clear and can be convincingly explained
- once committed, both the Nation and the Armed Forces must be implacable.

Leaders took advantage of the decade and a half between Vietnam and Desert Shield to shape the U.S. military into the most lethal and disciplined fighting machine in the world. The commitment of resources to create this force paid enormous dividends. Undeniably, the reinvention of land-sea-air forces was largely driven by the need to deter or fight huge Soviet ground formations menacing Western Europe. But this sophisticated team was also extraordinarily effective in the desert.

During one hundred hours of ground combat, preceded by the most stunning air campaign in history, seven Army and two Marine combat divisions in concert with coalition ground forces turned the fourth-largest army in the world into the second-largest army inside Iraq. This allied force used maneuver, deception, speed, and carefully targeted violence, which not only achieved its military objectives but saved lives and cut short what could have become a protracted struggle. The ground elements fought effectively and acted with compassion. This victory was possible because of a revolution in military affairs that was largely unseen by the American people until the lopsided victory in the Persian Gulf revealed its dimensions and power.

General Schwarzkopf and staff during victory parade.

DOD (Rob Jenson)

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People's War

Compared to any other force deployed by the Nation over its history, the soldiers, sailors, marines, and airmen who fought in Desert Storm were better educated (over 90 percent were high school graduates), more capable physically, better trained (through high-tech force-on-force, live-fire exercises as well as battlefield simulations), and more prepared for the operational environment faced in battle. Compared to the force of the late 1970s the contrast is stark. From 1976 to 1981 the Army routinely missed recruiting goals. Morale, readiness, and training were marginal and drug abuse, crime, and maintenance problems were high. Every service struggled with grave declines in readiness.

It took more than a decade to build the military that America eventually watched with pride during the Gulf War. Improved pay, benefits, and facilities contributed to the sense that serving in the Armed Forces was worthy of the best and brightest. Cutting-edge technology was crucial. But rebuilding the noncommissioned officer corps, forming a physically fit force, creating a disciplined military culture, and rejecting drug and alcohol abuse that sapped professional strength throughout the ranks after Vietnam was even more important.

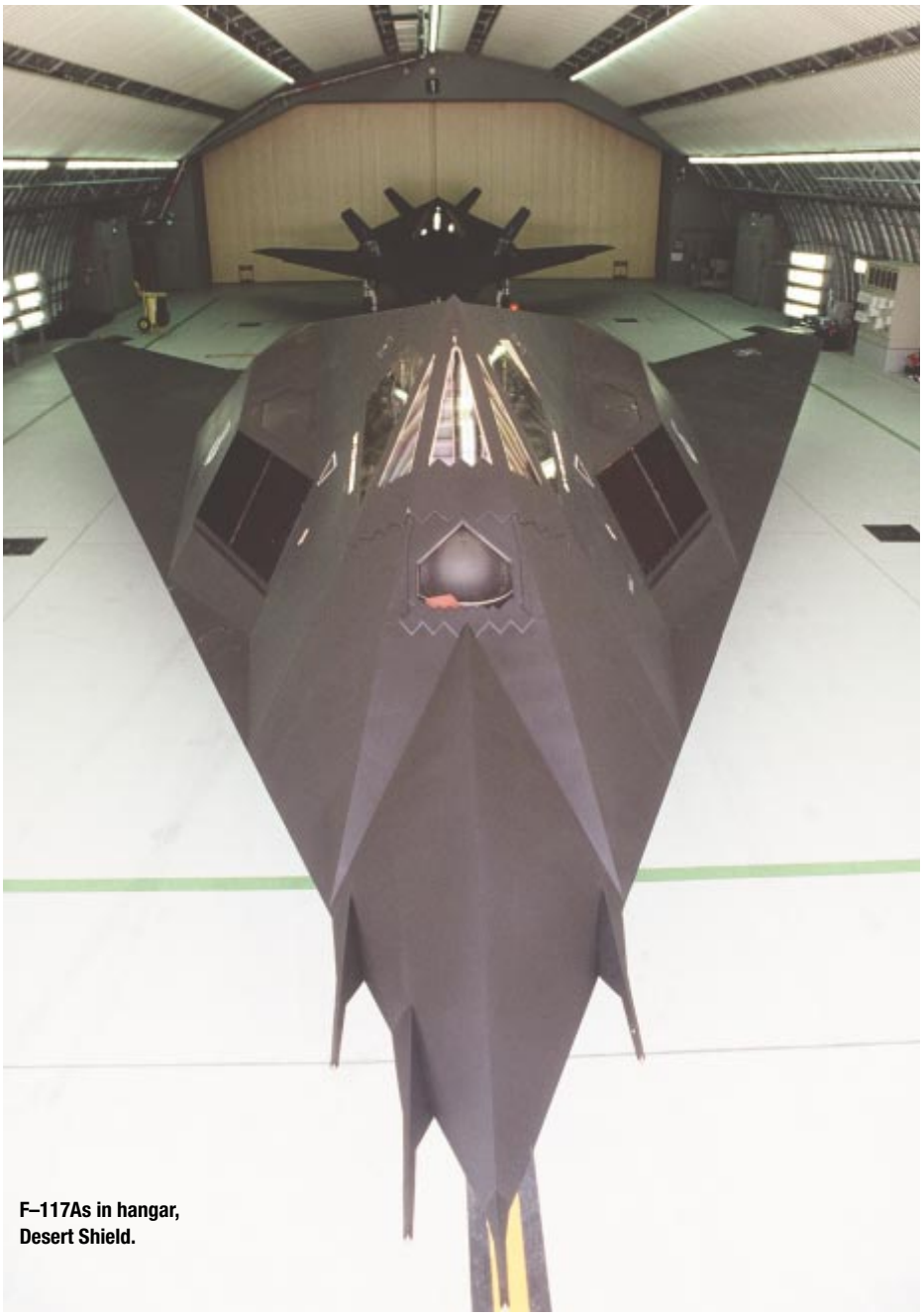
Research and development in the 1980s enabled the defense industrial base to develop and field revolutionary systems designed to overwhelm Soviet weapons and tactics. Critics derided many of these systems in the years before the Gulf War. Some defense skeptics, for example, doubted the survivability and utility of the Bradley fighting vehicle. The Abrams tank was regarded as unreliable and unsupportable because of its fuel consumption. Several advanced weapons and other systems—including the sea-launched cruise missile, F–117 stealth fighter, and many night vision devices and electronic warfare capabilities—had never been used in combat and had undergone limited operational testing. Some criticized this hardware as too complex and prone to failure under harsh conditions. The Soviets were routinely cited as the model of a more rational military-industrial process. Such cynicism proved unfounded as coalition hardware proved equal to the task.

However, U.S. forces in Desert Storm could have won the conflict decisively even if they had swapped their equipment with the Iraqi military. This view reflects a deeply ingrained, experience-based belief. Effectively employing sophisticated matériel requires demanding, results-oriented training. In contrast to the American approach, Iraqi training during the Desert Shield buildup was almost as pathetic as its strategic leadership.

Thoughts of Battle

Doctrine plays a unifying role in the employment of people, resources, and time. History demonstrates that brave soldiers with excellent equipment can be paralyzed and defeated if lacking in doctrine to integrate and leverage their advantages. The humiliation of France by the *Wehrmacht* and *Luftwaffe* during the opening moves of *Blitzkrieg* in World War II makes that point. Prior to Desert Storm, the services invested years integrating their warfighting doctrine. That collaboration produced forward-looking, offense-based strategies that exploited American strengths and enemy weaknesses. In the early 1980s, for example, the Army moved from a reactive and static combat doctrine known as active defense to AirLand Battle, which focused on maneuver flexibility, synergy, and violence. The change in doctrine paralleled improved leadership training throughout the Army. AirLand Battle stressed bold, coordinated ground and air offense and exploiting battlefield initiative, which provided a decisive advantage during the hundred-hour maneuver that characterized the attack of Desert Storm.

A crucial factor in improving doctrinal initiatives was that commanders and units practiced and honed concepts under realistic conditions. Beginning with top gun air combat school by the Navy, the services developed state-of-the-art, force-on-force training and exercises linking doctrine and new systems under realistic conditions. Such training produced leaders whose individual and collective success (and promotions) were based on demanding and fully transparent exercises. The Army National Training Center at Fort Irwin, Air Force Red Flag at Nellis Air Force Base, Marine Air Ground Combat Center at Twentynine Palms, and Navy instrumented sea warfare training in the Caribbean allowed warfighters to make fatal mistakes in a realistic battle lab instead of combat. At joint training centers, combat leaders underwent a painful learning process that often damaged their egos but saved lives in war. A training atmosphere of candor, rapid feedback, and defined outcome standards was critical.



F–117As in hangar, Desert Shield.

DOD (Hans H. Deffner)

An Unsettled Legacy

Are the battlefield lessons that contributed to the success of Desert Storm relevant ten years later? Military leaders have frequently been accused of preparing to fight the last war. If this were the case at the moment, the Gulf War template would offer a wasted intellectual exercise at best and a prescription for defeat on some future battlefield at worst. Focusing doctrine on past successes can blind commanders to rapidly evolving asymmetrical threats which may target predictable U.S. military doctrine, leadership, and equipment in the future.

Some argue that the focus of doctrine on European armored combat left the United States with a force that had little application to post-modern war.

Advanced warfighting experiment, National Training Center.

13th Public Affairs Detachment (Richard Puckett)

The military today is being tasked with broader security missions. It is expected to tackle challenges ranging from peacekeeping to the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction. Providing humanitarian aid, combating terrorism, and confronting international drug cartels and organized crime are among the support duties. So what does the future hold?

First, people requirements have not changed significantly. The Armed Forces will continue to need a substantial number of personnel (1.5 million)—and tactical leaders with the motivation, skills, and mental agility to operate decisively in a complex, confusing, and dangerous international arena. As combat equipment becomes more sophisticated, broadly educated, literate, and highly trained people will be needed to operate and maintain it. Violent conflict will require global reach, rapid decisionmaking, and expanded notions of battlespace with digital, space-based information systems. At the same time, overwhelming levels of raw intelligence from a range of sensors could lead to paralysis rather than decisive action. The ability of leaders to assimilate real-time combat data and sort out vital information will be critical to success.

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The political sensitivity of future battlefields will be driven by their increasing transparency to high-tech media oversight, requiring leaders to function under challenging conditions despite intense scrutiny from international news sources and hostile political actors. Near instantaneous global communication creates a political-military environment in which tactical decisions by even junior noncommissioned officers can shape national strategy. Furthermore, advanced combat systems will put increasingly lethal, simplified weapons and targeting capabilities into the hands of enemy and friendly small-unit leaders. These operations will not be run successfully from either Washington or a unified commander's war room. The Armed Forces must continue to recruit and train capable people and imbue them with a level of judgment previously expected only of mature servicemembers.

America produces vast numbers of young men and women with great physical courage and leadership ability. Professionals of this caliber will not remain in the military simply for high pay, dual-income opportunities, large quarters, or predictable home-station time. Neither will they leave the service of their country because they fear death or injury in combat. However, they will be unforgiving if denied the combat edge and confidence generated by demanding and realistic training, first-class technology, and a culture based on trust, respect, and personal growth.

Developing, acquiring, and fielding combat systems requires making assumptions on next generation threats that will shape resource commitments and future doctrine. Today military research and development is conceptually adrift. The mayhem and brutality of modern violence are functions of nonstate militias, truck bombs, chemical weapons, cruise missiles, diesel submarines, high-speed missile boats, mines, and large amounts of Cold War hardware flooding arms bazaars. Billions of dollars in drug money and international criminal activity contribute to this lethal mix.

The equipment-technology doctrine cycle must be driven by requirements for transportation and logistics to deploy from the continental United States. Joint forces must be ready to fight on arrival. New threats to international security can't be resolved by sea-launched precision weapons and airpower based at home. Today the Nation has essentially the wrong force structure for the missions at hand. It requires new concepts, additional resources, and a revitalized strategic political consensus to build capabilities geared for both warfighting and peace operations.

Here the lesson of the Gulf War is that substantial funding, research and development, and procurement are crucial for the national defense posture. The challenge is preserving the existing infrastructure while developing the next generation of doctrine, training, and weapons. The procurement cycle for some major systems is 15 years. There will be serious overlap with older combat systems that must be maintained even though more recent versions have been developed and gradually integrated. Nevertheless, these systems are aging. The M–1 tank entered the inventory in the early 1980s and the F–15 fighter went into service in 1975. Incremental improvements in many battlefield systems have given the United States preeminent capabilities. But the Pentagon must look beyond contemporary technology and force structures and identify what is needed to dominate the battlefield of tomorrow.

Launching Tomahawk missile from *USS Mississippi.*

DOD (Hederlite)

Joint strike fighter approaching Patuxent River.

Naval Air Station Patuxent River (Vernon Pugh)

Two principles of national security will be critical in maintaining military dominance while anticipating requirements. First, the Armed Forces must be prepared for the worst-case scenario: high intensity conflict against well equipped and determined enemies. Substantial forces fielded by modern nation-states still pose the most significant, though least likely, threat to national interests. Prior to the Gulf War most militaries were organized around this core commitment. This strategy worked. The United States prevailed in Desert Storm and during the Cold War. The price of failure in a possible high-intensity conflict means we must not allow our focus to drift from such large-scale threats.

Second, systems must be developed that are relevant to realistic scenarios for deployments from the United States to distant battlefields. The Armed Forces can't count on enemies to allow a six-month buildup like Desert Shield. A greater investment is needed in capabilities to deliver decisive force anywhere in the world on short notice. Major sea-based, pre-positioned equipment is vital. However, the deployability of ground and air systems is also crucial. Capability must be transformed from a forward-deployed ground force—backed by CONUS-based assets—to a CONUS-centered air-ground force with global air and sea-delivery reach.

Washington also must rethink what seems to be a self-defeating requirement that each force deployment be articulated to the American people through an exit strategy. This concept has been an unmitigated disaster. Events in the Persian Gulf reaffirmed the wisdom of committing troops to warfighting or peace missions only when the Nation is determined to achieve its purpose—whether that entails bloodshed or a fifty-year presence as in the case of NATO. The elevation of the notion of exit strategy to the status of a strategic principle signals weak commitment. It may also ensure that time and initiative are ceded to a potential enemy.

Overmatching Force

The doctrine produced to defeat the Warsaw Pact proved itself in Desert Storm. It stressed offensive initiative and coordinated day-night employment of advanced combat systems. The battle doctrine was well suited to high intensity operations conducted against the brutal, rigid, and poorly led Iraqi forces. In preparing for high-intensity conflicts of the future, the principles of AirLand Battle doctrine remain valid. Though refinements in existing doctrine are needed because of technological advances, the fundamentals of joint, synchronized offensive are unlikely to change.

Over the last decade the Armed Forces have conducted various operations around the world as part of humanitarian, counterterrorist, counterdrug, and peacekeeping missions.

These security responsibilities challenged the military to develop new doctrine for contingencies at the lower end of the operational continuum. Involvement in multinational peacekeeping and peace-enforcement is likely to remain a requirement.

Postulating the employment of remote lethal targeting technology to wage war—followed by the unopposed deployment of peacekeepers—has given rise to the hopeful but misplaced belief that future wars can be fought with little or no loss of American lives. But absolute dependence on high tech in pursuit of a bloodless war may introduce at least two flaws into warfighting doctrine. First, it will limit the ability to respond to the full range of possible conflicts. There is also danger in communicating to potential enemies that the direct employment of ground combat troops in favor of other options is foreclosed. The military can't protect both Americans and innocent populations abroad by adopting zero-casualty force protection as an operational priority. There are causes for which our soldiers should be willing to fight and die.

A second danger resulting from a misguided belief in bloodless conflict comes from turning abstract notions of battlefield fairness or proportionality into an operational imperative. America has a strong sense of fair play and justice for all. It abhors human suffering, a virtue which is among its greatest strengths. However, blindly applying fairness and balance on the battlefield is inimical to national security. History suggests that the denial of military experience increases the long-term suffering inherent in combat.

Any military that limits itself to narrowly calibrated proportional force is an organization in search of defeat. The Armed Forces do not go off to war to put up a good fight; they go to win. They do not attack in kind; they attack with every type of force to break enemy will and defeat it. By prosecuting warfare aggressively, one not only limits losses but shortens the conflict and thus lessens the suffering of noncombatants and often enemy forces themselves.

The Armed Forces must act in accord with international law. They must respect the rights of prisoners and noncombatants. They are accountable to the American people and scrutinized by the media. Like political leaders who must explain the justness of a cause, military leaders should inform the public on strategies used to protect national interests. But when the Nation goes to war, commanders are entrusted with the lives of American men and women. Leaders from the President down to a fire team leader bear responsibility for achieving objectives while safeguarding lives.

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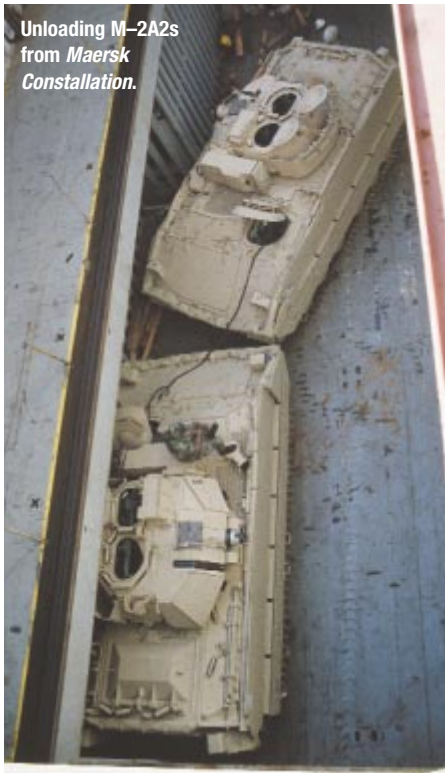
The military must strive to employ its forces to maximal advantage in prosecuting complex missions. However, critics argue that the services remain parallel and noncomplementary and that they are characterized by parochial doctrines, which generate turf battles over resources.

The dominance of expensive, high-tech equipment will require a higher quality of training for joint forces. To obtain the maximum benefit from advanced technology, an equivalent long-term resource commitment to troop and leader training, education, and career development is needed.

To accomplish the range of missions the Armed Forces are likely to face, training must be both tailored and flexible. It will require assets commensurate with the complexities of warfare. Simulations and virtual battlefields will become preferred methods of joint training. The existing force structure often will not allow matching forces to contingencies. Joint commanders must deal with the operational expectation that units may be sent anywhere any time for various missions. Realistic, rigorous joint and combined arms training will have to produce cohesive teams that can adapt to rapidly changing operational environments.

Though strategy, force structure, and technology may differ in the future, the principles on which the Desert Storm force was built should continue to serve us well. The lessons of the Gulf War related to personnel, equipment, doctrine, and training must be applied to the challenges the Nation will face by virtue of having the world's greatest military. Leaders will need the agility to respond to threats faster and more competently. America must continue to bear the burdens of peace operations, humanitarian aid, economic containment, counterterrorism, illegal drugs, et al. Its military must prepare for violent engagement against major organized forces that might threaten Southwest Asia, Japan, Korea, Thailand, or Israel. The United States must also provide support for multinational military engagement designed to keep sea and air routes open for the global free-trade community, maintain access to energy supplies, and defend vital global interests. **JFQ**



Unloading M–2A2s from *Maersk Constallation.*

DOD (Brian Cumper)